

# **Coso Range**

*CDCA 131*



COSO RANGE WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CDCA-131)

1. THE STUDY AREA ---

27,119      acres

The Coso Range WSA is located in Inyo County in the northwestern portion of the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA). The nearest rural communities are Darwin, approximately 15 miles to the southeast and Olancho, approximately 15 miles to the west. The area is composed of 26,486 acres of public land under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and 633 acres of State land. No split estate or private lands are located within the WSA (see Map 1 and Table 1).

In a clock-wise manner, the northern boundary starts approximately one and one-half miles southeast of State Highway 190 on an unnamed dirt road. The eastern boundary follows the dirt road south for five miles. At this point, the boundary follows topographic contours on the eastern edge of Joshua Flat south for approximately eleven miles, until it meets the China Lake Naval Weapons Center's (NWC) northern boundary. The boundary follows the NWC boundary west for approximately three miles. The boundary then trends north along the base of Silver Mountain for one mile and then cuts cross country for five miles until it meets an unnamed dirt road. The boundary then follows the dirt road for two miles and cuts cross country for five miles until it meets the extreme northern portion of the boundary.

The WSA contains approximately 20% alluvial fans, 60% mountains and 20% flats. The topography consists of alluvial plains which extend northwest towards Owens Dry Lake from the Coso Mountain Range. The middle of the unit consists of the Coso Mountain Range which is a region displaying volcanic activities and erosional features. Some interior valleys and washes are also present. Joshua Flat, which is an interior valley, forms the southern portion of the WSA. Elevations range from 4,000 feet in the northwest portion of the area to approximately 7,200 feet at the top of the Coso Mountain Range. Rounded peaks form high points in the middle of that range.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). Various suitability recommendations were analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) for the CDCA Plan and a summary of the area's wilderness values was included in Appendix III of the Final EIS. Only the no-wilderness recommendation was analyzed for the WSA in the EIS. The all-wilderness option was eliminated from further consideration during the scoping process for the CDCA Plan.

2.	<u>RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE</u> —	0	acres recommended for wilderness
		26,486	BLM acres recommended for nonwilderness

No wilderness is the recommendation for this WSA. The entire acreage in this WSA is released for uses other than wilderness. This recommendation will be implemented in a manner which will use all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

The Balanced Alternative is the environmentally preferable alternative as outlined in the CDCA Plan and further explained in the California Wilderness Study Overview.

While the WSA did meet the general criteria of wilderness as defined in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964, further studies during the preparation of the CDCA Plan determined that the area's values as wilderness were minimal and were exceeded by other resource values. The Coso Range WSA is not recommended to become part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) for the following reasons: (1) marginal wilderness values; (2) motorized recreation use; and (3) mineral potential.

Naturalness has been adversely impacted by vehicle routes within the WSA. Solitude is available within the area, but it is not considered to be outstanding. Nondescript topography and an absence of vegetative screening in a large, flat and unattractive area called Joshua Flat also detracts from the solitude of the area.

Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation exist within the area, but are not outstanding due to the nondescript land forms. Joshua Flat, in the southern half of the area, is flat and unappealing to the wilderness traveler. Backpacking and hiking within the area has never been a significant activity.

There are approximately 11 miles of routes of travel including primitive ways, washes and other unmaintained routes of access which will remain available for vehicular use. Traditional uses within the area are dependent upon motorized vehicles for access. Uses include rockhounding, quail and chukar hunting, and use by grazing permittees and mineral exploration personnel. The area is within five miles of an off-highway vehicle (OHV) open area. Vehicle use from this open area affects roads which border and enter the WSA.

Mineral potential exists within the area which outweighs the value of the area for wilderness. A moderate mineral potential exists for uranium in the northwestern one-third of the area. The southwestern portion of the area has moderate potential for rare earths (cerium). The northeastern portion of the area has a moderate potential for clay resources. Within the WSA, there were 265 unpatented mining claims as of December, 1987. Many of these claims are thought to be able to withstand a validity examination. Development of such claims will seriously impact wilderness values throughout the area (Map 2).

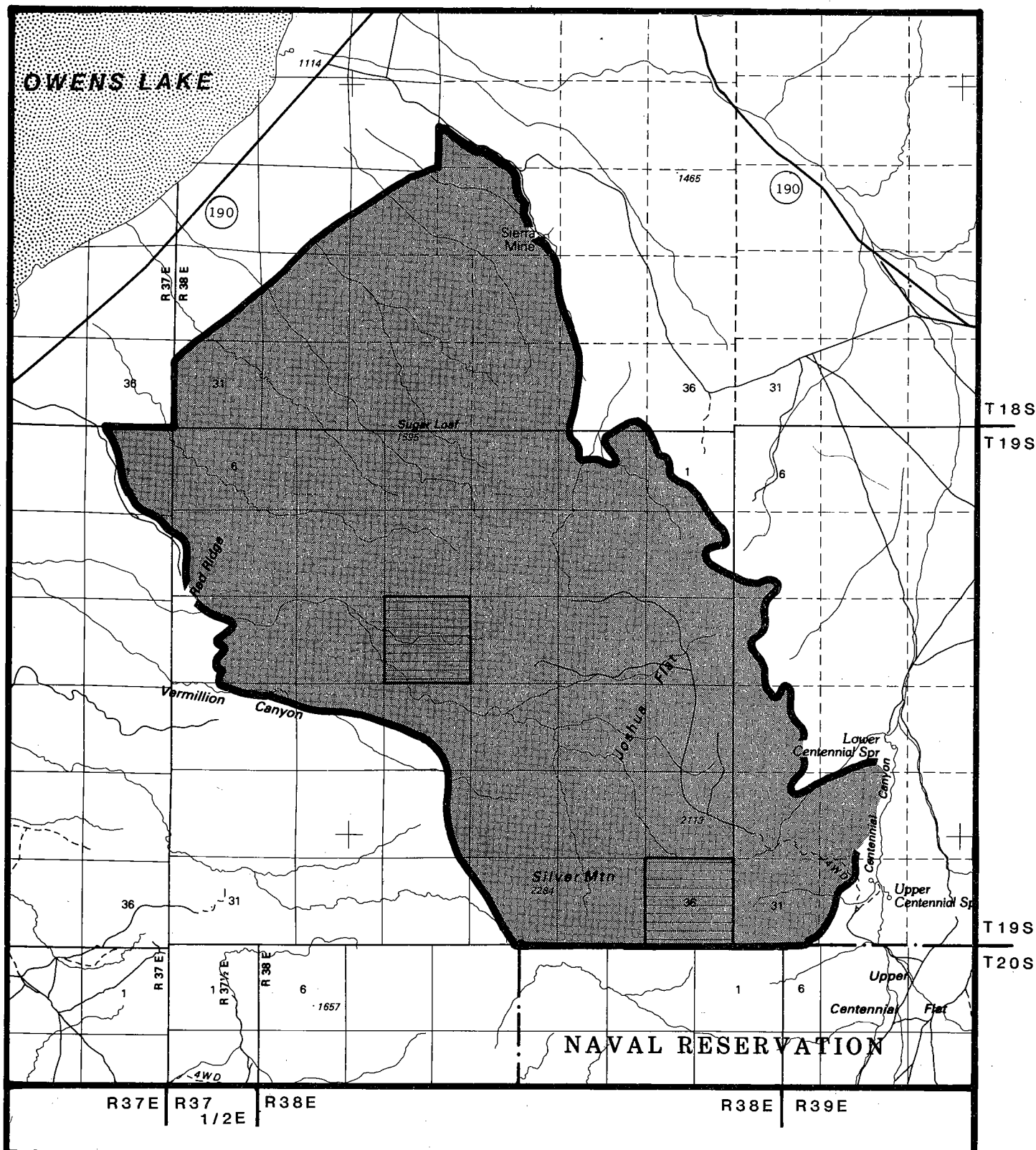
TABLE 1 - Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area

<u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BIM	(surface and subsurface)	26,486
Split Estate	(BIM surface only)	0
Inholdings		
State		633
Private		0
Total		<u>27,119</u>
<u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BIM	(within WSA)	0
BIM	(outside WSA)	0
Split Estate	(within WSA)	0
Split Estate	(outside WSA)	0
Total BIM Land Recommended for Wilderness		<u>0</u>
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
<u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BIM	(surface and subsurface)	26,486
Split Estate	(BIM surface only)	0
Total BIM Lands Not Recommended for Wilderness		<u>26,486</u>


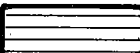

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The majority of the area has been affected primarily by natural forces. A series of vehicle routes impact the naturalness of the area in the southern one-half of the WSA. The routes are used to gain access to the Joshua Flat area which is used as a grazing area and a mining prospecting area. The northern portion of the area has a route system which cuts into the WSA for four miles ending at mining adits and prospecting areas.

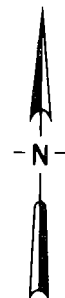


- |   |   |                            |
|---|---|----------------------------|
|  | NONE  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS               |                            |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |                            |

- |   |              |
|---|--------------|
|  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | STATE        |
|  | PRIVATE      |

**Coso Range  
Proposal  
MAP-1**

0 1 2 3  
MILES



CDCA-131  
JUNE, 1988

2. Solitude: Solitude can be found within the WSA although it cannot be considered outstanding. The low rolling mountains of the northern portion of the Coso Mountain Range afford some solitude but it is minimal. The Joshua Flat area, which makes up about one-half of the WSA, offers some solitude, but due to its flat topography and lack of vegetative screening, solitude can only be considered average.

This WSA is periodically overflowed by military aircraft as part of the national defense mission taking place in approved military operating areas and flight corridors. The visual intrusions and associated noise create periodic temporary effects on solitude which are deemed necessary and acceptable as a part of the defense preparedness of the nation.

3. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Opportunities exist for primitive and unconfined recreation, but it cannot be considered outstanding. The alluvial fans within the northern portion of the area have potential for primitive recreation. The middle of the WSA is composed of the Coso Mountain range which is a low range of mountains which offers potential for primitive and unconfined recreation. The southern portion of the area in Joshua Flats has potential for primitive and unconfined recreation but is a flat unattractive area where recreationists seldom visit.
4. Special Features: Four areas of cultural sensitivity occur in the WSA. Identified resources include prehistoric campsites and activity areas from different periods of time. The area was used historically by Owens Valley Shoshone, Owens Valley Paiute, and the Panamint Shoshone Indians for hunting and collecting food plants and materials.

B. Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System  
(NWPS)

1. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems: This WSA contains 26,486 acres of the American Desert/Creosote Bush ecosystem. The Coso Range WSA would not increase the diversity of the types of ecosystems represented in the NWPS. This ecosystem is well represented in other WSAs in the CDCA recommended for wilderness designation.

Table 2 - Ecosystem Representation

<u>Bailey-Kuchler Classification Domain/Province/PNV</u>	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	<u>areas</u>	<u>acres</u>	<u>areas</u>	<u>acres</u>
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
American Desert/Creosote Bush	1	343,753	117	4,241,243
<u>CALIFORNIA</u>				
American Desert/Creosote Bush	1	343,753	88	3,627,619

2. Expanding the opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation within a day's driving time (five hours) of major population centers: The WSA is within a five-hour drive of six major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population centers.

Table 3  
Wilderness Opportunities for Residents  
of Major Population Centers

<u>Population Centers</u>	<u>NWPS areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	<u>areas</u>	<u>acres</u>	<u>areas</u>	<u>acres</u>
<u>California</u>				
Anaheim-Santa Ana	25	2,823,534	153	5,703,616
Bakersfield	32	4,071,358	128	3,998,548
Los Angeles-Long Beach	27	2,876,234	135	4,958,751
Oxnard-Ventura	23	2,195,198	85	2,703,260
Riverside-San Bernardino	22	2,031,054	205	7,658,649
Visalia-Tulare-Porterville	34	4,431,635	61	1,681,921

3. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas: The WSA is within 50 air miles of 14 BLM WSAs recommended for wilderness designation. The closest designated wilderness area is Golden Trout, managed by the Forest Service, ten miles to the west.

#### C. Manageability

The Coso Range WSA is manageable as wilderness; however, vehicle use is extensive in the area. Primary users are employees of mineral exploration firms and grazing permittees. If designated wilderness, this traditional vehicle use could create management problems. Mineral



potential within the area could also result in manageability problems. The northwestern one-third of the area has a moderate potential for uranium. The southwestern portion of the area has a moderate potential for rare earths (cerium) and the northeastern portion of the area has a moderate potential for clay resources. Due to future mineral needs, the above minerals could be in more demand in the future. As of December, 1987 there were 265 unpatented mining claims located within the WSA. Development of any valid existing rights would seriously degrade wilderness values throughout large portions of the WSA.

Military overflights in this WSA must be considered to maintain the integrity of the existing and future national defense mission as well as the wilderness resource.

#### D. Energy and Mineral Resource Values

1. Summary of Information Known at the Time of the Preliminary Suitability Recommendation: The Coso Range WSA is located in the BLM Haiwee Reservoir Geology-Energy-Mineral (G-E-M) Resource Area (GRA). BLM G-E-M data in the wilderness section of the CDCA Plan EIS (Volume B, Appendix III, 1980) was incomplete and had not been fully analyzed, integrated, and interpreted at the time of the preliminary suitability recommendation. However, the EIS G-E-M narrative of 1980 stated that the WSA has potential for the occurrence of uranium, metals, montmorillonite, perlite, pumice, and cinders. The northwest portion of the WSA lays within a large block of 2,309 unpatented claims located for uranium and filed with the BLM as of December 12, 1979.

A BLM GRA report was not produced from the file data and the WSA was not classified for the potential occurrence of mineral resources. However, the 1980 BLM GRA file contains data that documents a significant geochemical anomaly for uranium in sedimentary rocks outcropping in the northwestern one-third of the WSA. Also included in the BLM GRA file is a documented significant (samples equal to or greater than one standard deviation above normal) rare earth (cerium) anomaly in the granitic rocks outcropping in the southwestern one-third of the WSA. In addition, the BLM GRA file data included an estimate of \$92,000,000 (1979 dollars) for clay deposits (montmorillonite) located in the vicinity of the Sierra Talc Mine in the northeastern portion of the WSA.

According to Stinson, (1977, Geologic map and sections of the Keeler 15 minute quadrangle, Inyo County, California, California Division of Mines and Geology, Map Sheet 38) the northwestern one-third of the WSA is underlain by sandstones, siltstones and clays of the Coso Formation. Stinson also states that uranium mineralization is locally present and associated with the rocks of the Coso Formation. Based on the favorable geology and the significant geochemical anomaly as documented in the 1980 BLM GRA data and the number of mining claims filed for uranium in this area, the

northwestern one-third of the WSA can be classified as having a moderate potential for the occurrence of uranium according to the BLM classification as shown on Map 2.

Jolly, in (1975, Mineral Facts and Problems, Bureau of Mines, Bulletin 667, page 894) states that the lanthanons (rare earth minerals), of which cerium is one of the more common, occur most often in granitic rocks. According to Stinson (1977), the central and southwestern portions of the WSA are underlain by granitic rocks. Based on the favorable geology and the geochemical anomaly as documented in the 1980 BLM GRA file, the southwestern portion of the WSA can be classified as having a moderate potential for the occurrence of rare earth (cerium) mineralization.

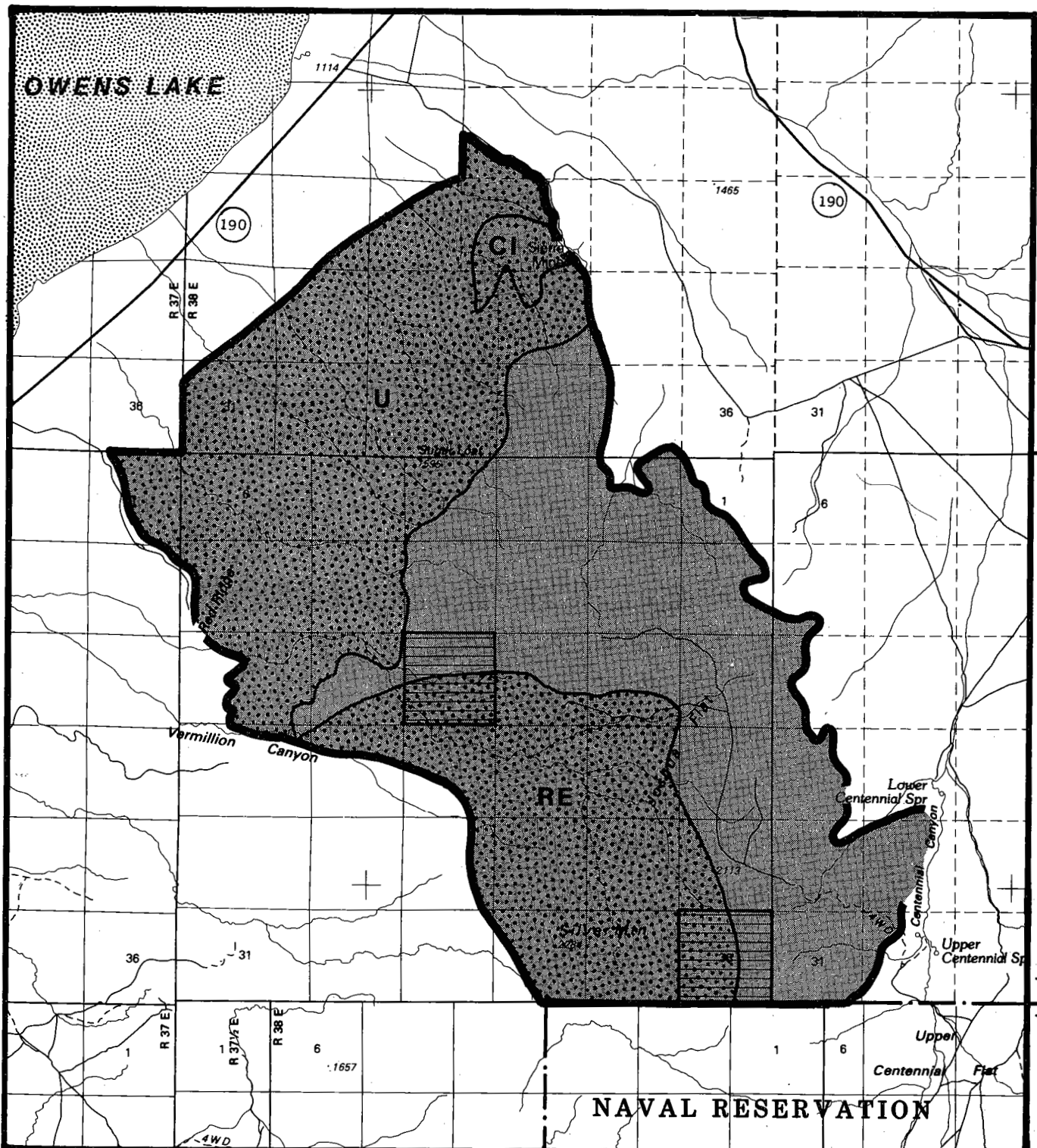
The 1980 BLM GRA report assigned an estimated value to montmorillonite clay deposits located in the northeast portion of the WSA near the Sierra Talc Mine. Norman and Stewart, in Mines and Mineral Resources of Inyo County, California (1951, California Jour. Mines and Geology, v. 47, p. 98-99) describe the Calearth Clay Deposit located one-half mile to the east of the Sierra Talc Mine. The geology, as described by Norman and Stewart, occurs in the northeast portion of the WSA (Stinson, 1977 CDMG Map Sheet 38). Based on the favorable geology and the close vicinity of a known producing clay deposit, the northeastern portion of the WSA can be classified under the BLM classification system as having a moderate potential for the occurrence of clay.

2. Summary of Significant New Mineral Resource Data Collected Since the Preliminary Suitability Recommendation Which Should be Considered in the Final Recommendation: No U.S. Geological Survey or U.S. Bureau of Mines mineral surveys have been conducted in the WSA because it is recommended nonsuitable for wilderness designation.

In 1983 and 1984, BLM accepted and approved two plans of operation for exploration drilling on the Coso prospect. The Coso prospect consists of 180 unpatented mining claims located primarily within the WSA, but extending into non-WSA land to the northeast. The drilling program proposed the drilling of ten exploration holes in the search of precious metal mineralization. Results of the drilling program have not been made public. Mining Claims in the WSA are summarized on Table 4, taken from BLM records dated December, 1987.

Table 4 - Mining Claims

TYPE	NUMBER			ACRES		
	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL
Lode	N/A	264	264	N/A	5,280	5,280
Placer	N/A	1	1	N/A	40	40
Mill Site	N/A	0	0	N/A	0	0
Total	N/A	265	265	N/A	5,320	5,320



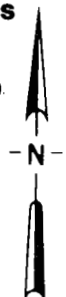
- NONE** Recommended for Wilderness
- Recommended for Non Wilderness
- Land outside WSA Recommended for Wilderness
- Split Estate
- State
- Private

### Explanation

- High Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
- Moderate Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
- M** Moderate Mineral Potential Location in a High Mineral Potential Area
- H** High Mineral Potential Location in a Moderate Mineral Potential Area

### Commodity Symbols

- CI** Clay (montmorillonite)
- RE** Rare Earths
- U** Uranium



**Coso Range**  
**Mineral Resource Potential**



**MAP-2**  
**CDCA-131**

E. Summary of Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action

1. Impact on Wilderness Values: Wilderness values could suffer adverse impacts due to potential mineral exploration and development within specific areas within the WSA as described in this document. Continued use of the area by motorized vehicles could also have moderate adverse impacts on wilderness values.
2. Impact on Locatable Mineral Exploration and Development: Opportunities for exploration and development would continue to be available within the area. Exploration and development would be subject to regulations stated in 43 CFR 3809 regarding surface disturbance, as well as any additional constraints stated in the CDCA Plan.
3. Impact on Motorized Recreation: Opportunities for motorized recreation on designated routes would continue to be available within the area.
4. Impact on Native American Values: Native American Values would not be affected by nondesignation. Native Americans would be able to drive into the area on designated routes to collect native plant fibers.
5. Impact on Livestock Grazing: Forage allocations for livestock would be able to increase under normal administrative constraints.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local social or economic considerations were identified in the Final CDCA Plan and EIS. Therefore, no further discussion of this topic will occur in this document.

G. Summary of WSA - Specific Public Comments

Public comments were solicited throughout all phases in the development of the CDCA Plan, finalized in 1980. Issues raised by the public during the Inventory and Study Phase were taken into account during development of the Draft Plan Alternatives and Proposed Plan. The following is a summary of all comments received. Inaccuracies that are known to exist are noted in parentheses.

1. Inventory Phase: A large number of comments were received indicating interest in motorized vehicle recreation. Other comments argued the presence or absence of natural conditions in those portions of the roadless area not identified as possessing wilderness characteristics, but no further changes in the findings were appropriate.
2. Study Phase: Of the 45 study comments received on this WSA, 21 favored wilderness designation. Features which were said to enhance wilderness suitability included Joshua Flat, wildlife (Inyo mule

deer, black toad, desert bighorn, and golden eagle), vegetation (rich variety of wild flowers, cholla, white cedars, pinyon-juniper-Joshua tree woodland), archaeology (petroglyphs, pictographs, Indian artifacts), the Coso volcanic field, and an area rich in paleontological values. Some respondents felt that contiguity to the Naval Weapons Center would facilitate wilderness management and, possibly, allow extension of the Center's ecological program into WSA #131.

Several respondents said that although the area had been open to OHV activity, damage was minimal and did not detract from wilderness suitability. Others wanted to add McCloud Flat and Lower Centennial Flat back to the WSA and to also add Black Rock Canyon.

Most of the people opposing wilderness preferred OHV recreational use for this area. Ten of the communications were Wilderness Evaluation Forms from members of the California Association of Four-Wheel Drive Clubs. They cited the past open designation under the Interim Critical Management Plan and the variety of applicable uses, which included rockhounding, camping, hunting, dune running, four-wheeling, motorcycling, prospecting, trail riding, nature study, and photography. Other respondents stressed the mineralization of the area and the desire to continue mineral exploration and development. They also felt that existing and past mining structures and roads detracted from wilderness suitability.

Many respondents mentioned the noise of overflights of jets from nearby military bases which they felt detracted from an atmosphere of solitude. The California State Lands Commission protested inclusion of WSA 131 among the WSAs meeting Sec 2(c) wilderness criteria. The Commission thought this might have an adverse effect on the State's management of one of its holdings for uranium prospecting.

Five letters were received in response to the Public Input Workbook (3/15/79). One favored wilderness designation, while the others were from mining and energy companies who opposed wilderness due to its potential effects on exploration and development of minerals and geothermal energy. Two mining companies particularly wanted to delete the northwestern portion of the WSA because of their mineral interests. One individual insisted that the WSA did not meet wilderness criteria because of man's imprints, especially in the area near the Naval Weapons Center.

3. Draft Plan Alternatives: No public comments specific to this WSA were received in response to the Draft Plan Alternatives. However, this WSA was one of those opposed by the National Outdoor Coalition, a coalition of mining, rockhounding, and off-highway vehicle groups. A large number of club members sent in printed coupons and letters supporting this position. Conservation

organizations and their members wrote many letters recommending wilderness designation for all WSAs within the CDCA. The Inyo County Board of Supervisors opposed wilderness designation for this area.

4. Proposed Plan: There were no specific comments on this particular WSA in response to the Proposed Plan. Motorized vehicle organizations and conservation groups maintained the same positions stated for the Draft Alternatives, as did the Inyo County Board of Supervisors.